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Madonna, Elton, Stevie Wonder Defend Eminem

Fellow artists rally behind controversial rapper, as gay-rights leader decries bisexual John's planned duet with him on 'Stan.'

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"Evil" is how one leading gay-rights activist described Elton John's decision to perform with Eminem at Wednesday night's Grammy awards.

But artists from Madonna to Stevie Wonder stood up in support of the controversial rapper on the eve of the music industry's biggest night.

Spurred on by the controversy surrounding Eminem's four Grammy nominations — which will culminate with the outspoken Marshall Mathers III dueting with equally outspoken gay-rights activist John on the rapper's "Stan" — the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) held a "town hall" meeting called "Intolerance in Music," in partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

In his opening remarks at the gathering at the Los Angeles Public Library on Tuesday (February 20), GLAAD entertainment media director R. Scott Seomin said he was "not here to speak out against Eminem. We're here to speak out against his lyrics, which encourage violence against gays and lesbians and women."

While Seomin said he wasn't attacking Eminem, he did attack John. "Why Elton John is performing is pretty baffling," Seomin said. "The gay and lesbian community is pretty upset by this. We feel betrayed by Elton John, who has used his gayness for good [in the past] and here he's using it for evil."

GLAAD and other gay groups, and women's groups, have attacked Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* — which is nominated for Album of the Year, as well as Best Rap Album — for alleged attacks on homosexuals and women.

But despite the Recording Academy's promise to bring together artists, young fans and members of GLAAD, the meeting took place with only about 30 members of the public, outnumbered by almost three times as many journalists.

Several artists — including Eminem's producer Dr. Dre — were asked to attend, but none showed up, according to an source who requested anonymity. That left NARAS President Michael Greene, Seomin, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual activist Jessie Funes, Eminem fan Web site creator Andrea Aguilar and Beyond Music marketing director Todd Bisson to respond to comments from the small but vocal audience.

Still, the exchange between audience members became heated when activist Robin Tyler asked Greene if he would defend lyrics that included epithets directed towards blacks and Asians.

"It's hard to say," Greene answered. "We're all used to music coming from the right-headed place of an issue. [Whether it's the] blacklist, the anthems of civil rights music, our exploitations in Southern Asia ... music has always shaken society, and it's shaken it from the right perspective."

Greene described Eminem's music as coming from a "wrong-headed perspective." "[He's an artist] who has come up from a very jagged-edged childhood; he speaks a language which is guttural street language. The reason that you're upset is that he has evoked a reaction, and that reaction is part of the reason that art is what it is."

Seomin asked for Eminem to apologize for his "anti-gay" lyrics and to promise not to repeat them.

But Eminem fan Aguilar said she and her fellow listeners realize that the rapper's not serious, and that they separate the rapper from his "Slim Shady" alter ego. "When he's angry he writes as Slim Shady," Aguilar said. "There's a difference between anger and hate. We laugh because he says crazy stuff."

Greene said he wasn't concerned about high-schoolers like Aguilar. "The real fear is the 7-year-olds, the 11-year-olds who aren't sophisticated enough," Greene said.

"Out of the 8-10 million copies [of *The Marshall Mathers LP* sold], not everyone is in on the joke," Seomin added.

Eminem's second album has been certified eight-times platinum — or 8 million copies shipped — by the Recording Industry Association of America.

The Detroit-area rapper has been the talk of the Grammys since it was announced in January that he was up for four awards: Album of the Year, Best Rap Album, Best Rap Solo Performance (for "The Real Slim Shady") and Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group, for his appearance on Dr. Dre's "Forgot About Dre."

On Tuesday, several past and present Grammy nominees came out in support of Eminem in the *Los Angeles Times*.

"As a gay artist, I'm asked by a lot of people, 'But what about the content of Eminem's music?' " John wrote. "I think there is far more humor on the album than people think. It appeals to my English black sense of humor. We live in an age of political correctness where you can't say this or that. I honestly don't think people will go out and start beating and killing people because of this album." John said *The Marshall Mathers LP* got his vote for album of the year.

So did Madonna, who asked, "What is the big deal about Eminem?

"Since when is offensive language a reason for being unpopular?," she wrote in a note signed "Mrs. Ritchie." "I like the fact that Eminem is brash and angry and politically incorrect. At least he has an opinion. He's stirring things up, he's provoking a discussion, he's making people's blood boil. He's reflecting what's going on in society right now. That is what art is supposed to do."

R&B legend Stevie Wonder wrote that although he doesn't agree with a lot of what Eminem raps about, he supports his music.

"Rap to me is a modern blues — a statement of how and where people are at," Wonder wrote. "I think art is a reflection of our society, and people don't like to confront the realities in society. We dance forever around the issues, and [embrace] songs about unity and love. But until we really confront the truth, we are going to have a Tupac or Eminem or Biggie Smalls to remind us about it — and thank God. They force people to look at realities in society. That doesn't mean their reflection is my reflection."

Randy Newman — the Grammy-winning songwriter and composer of the soundtrack to Disney's "Toy Story" — also comes down on Eminem's side.

"I don't know from his work that he genuinely hates women or genuinely hates his mother, but I know that he's funny. I can't imagine people sit around the studio going, 'You really made a serious statement about women, Em.' He's the best comic sort of writer or storyteller that has come around in memory," Newman said.

Eminem also was the subject of much talk at the MusiCares Person of the Year tribute dinner, concert and silent auction Monday night.

"I think if people are really concerned about [issues like sexism and gay bashing] they would turn their attentions away from this one white rap guy to something that could be effective," singer Joan Osborne said. "It's heartening to see that people are at least noticing that there's sexism in the lyrics, because so many sexist things go by in our culture without people remarking on them. But I also think there's a lot of worse things happening to women than Eminem's lyrics."

Finally, another gay-rights group wants the public to know that GLAAD, which has condemned both Eminem and the Grammys' decision to allow the rapper to perform on its telecast, doesn't speak for all gays and lesbians. "I wouldn't want to ever censor any individual," said Christopher Gilbertson of the Log Cabin Republicans of Orange County (California). "The lyrics and remarks are not something we appreciate. But if people don't want to buy it, then they shouldn't buy it."